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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of older students, the "new majority" participating in higher education, in terms of enrollment trends, their characteristics as learners and consumers of the college product, challenges they present to educational processes and institutions, and the concept of a "learning society" in which lifelong learning is the norm. Adult learning characteristics are compared to those of the traditional student, and responsibilities of the colleges to recognize these characteristics and accomodate them are discussed. Institutional modifications in philosophy, image, access at all levels, bureaucratic routines, responses to subgroups such as the elderly, unemployed and handicapped, and tuition are examined. Problems regarding institutional adjustment to an increasingly older student body are also discussed, including faculty tenure and hiring practices, institutional budgets, financial resources, financial aid, and the attitudes of governing boards and state and federal legislative bodies. (LH)

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THE "OLDER" STUDENT: CHALLENGE TO ACADEME

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THE OLDER STUDENT: CHALLENGE TO ACADEME

The face of the college campus is changing; it is getting older. No longer is it the exclusive domain of recent high school graduates engaged in the next phase of preparation for life. More and more, colleges are host to adults of all ages who are fully engulfed in life, trying to fulfill many roles simultaneously, while having already lived enough years to have well formulated values, priorities and expectations.

This paper will explore the enrollment impact of these students on higher education, their characteristics as learners and as consumers of the college product, the challenges they pose to the world of academe, possible responses to these challenges and a look at what has been described as the "learning society". Before proceeding, however, it should be noted that many institutions are already responding to the needs of older students, to varying degrees. For them, some of the comments in this paper may not apply at all. Other statements may have to be modified, so that, for example, references to 'faculty' may have to be qualified by 'some' or 'a few', depending on the dynamics of particular institutions. The underlying theme of this discussion of the older student is to propose a new view of colleges and universities, different from the traditional one. The view is that of older students as an increasing group in the mainstream of college life, not simply in adjunct or peripheral programs. It is from that vantage point that the following material is being presented.

First, let us examine briefly the statistical trend of college enrollments by age. Data from the Bureau of the Census (Wiggins, 1977) show the following changes in college enrollments in the period from October 1972 to October 1976.

	October 1972	October 1976
Persons under age 25	72% of total	67% of total
Age 25 to 29	13.5%	15.1%
Age 30 to 34	5.8%	7.2%
Over age 34	8.6%	10.7%

In terms of the change in total numbers of students, colleges saw an increase of 22.5% in these four years. However, the under 25 age group increased only 13.9%, while the over 25 group increased 44.6%, clearly indicating a shift in the overall age makeup of college populations.

The study completed under Dorothy Knoell's direction (1976) provides revealing information about the age of students in California's public community colleges. This study showed that enrollment of part-time students increased three times as much as the enrollment of full-time students between 1969 and 1974, with the result that 50% of enrollees were over age 21. And, finally, in a study of non-traditional students published in late 1976, Murday uses the statistic of 48% of college students nationally being over age 22. Demographically, we know that this trend will continue and writers are beginning to use the phrase 'the new majority' (Hameister and Hickey, 1977) to describe this group of students.

The question could be asked, so what? Undoubtedly many in faculty and administrative positions as well as counseling and admissions offices insist that a student is a student is a student and that age, per se, is relatively irrelevant once someone chooses to assume that role. As Hameister and Hickey note (op.cit.), the response to older students has generally been to extend

the existing system rather than develop new systems based on student dissimilarities. That these dissimilarities exist has been borne out by the research and writings of Roger Gould, Gail Sheehy and others describing life stages and differing needs and responses of adults as they pass through the experiences of adult life. 'Over 21' is no longer seen as that homogeneous stage called 'adulthood'.

Malcolm Knowles has applied the findings about adult development to education in a theoretical framework called andragogy, which he defines as "the art and science of helping adults learn". (1970,38). The practice of andragogy is based on several assumptions about the adult learner. Knowles maintains that "... as a person matures, 1) his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directing human being; 2) he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning; 3) his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles; and 4) his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness." (op.cit.,39).

Hameister and Hickey, in their article "Traditional and Adult Students: a Dichotomy" (1977) have shown how these characteristics manifest themselves.

The following chart compares these two groups in a variety of student behaviors.

Traditional Student	New Majority
1. Continuing in school	1. Returning to school
2. Learning history strongly influenced by formal education	2. Learning history strongly influenced by informal education
3. Familiar with educational routine	3. Unfamiliar with educational routine and expectations
4. Primary time commitment to school--full-time student	4. Major time commitment to family and job--part-time student
5. Adequate communication and study skills	5. Frequent deficiencies in study and communication skills
6. Minimal work experience	6. Considerable relevant work experience
7. Micro frame of reference for a more orderly input of new ideas	7. Macro frame of reference based on life-experience which has both positive and negative implications for the learning process
8. Frequently no clear vocational goal	8. Frequently clear vocational goals, but not necessarily related to educational program
9. Educational goal is to receive a baccalaureate degree at minimum	9. Educational goal may be to receive a degree, but may also include some form of certification or licensure.
10. Speed of performance and peer competitiveness affects learning activities	10. Concept mastery and accuracy of performance more important than competition--frequently viewed as threatening
11. High academic grades play significant role in obtaining meaningful employment	11. Academic grades are not significant in terms of present employment situation
12. Clear idea of how he compares with academic performance of fellow students	12. No accurate basis on which to judge his academic potential

The question, then, is what are the implications of these differences for educational institutions?

Basically, they point to a responsibility placed on colleges to recognize these characteristics and accommodate them. The older learner is not likely to be a passive recipient of the traditional college program developed by curriculum committees or established by tradition and offered in traditional ways. Faculty, counselors and others need to incorporate the learners' objectives and expectations in the conduct of a course or program, organizing the learning experience in such a way that they are learner centered rather than teacher centered. Students may drop in and out of programs depending on how they perceive their immediate relevance. The instructor's role changes from being an information giver to being a facilitator who guides students in the process of moving toward their own goals. He/she also has the responsibility of guiding students through the process of self-inquiry, so that they do, in fact, become active learners and do not rely on old models of education which place students in the role of 'receivers' and teachers in the role of 'givers'. Significantly, while older students have a heightened self-concept of independence, they often do not have the skills to engage in self-directed learning, resulting in frustration and lack of accomplishment. Knowles (1975, 232-235) suggests that people have to be taught how to handle their own learning and suggests doing this through a specifically focused workshop which can be offered to all students. The workshop would include proactive rather than reactive learning activity, student inter-collaboration rather than competition and skill practice in using resources, such as libraries and experts, proactively. Along with this, faculty need a workshop to help them move from being transmitters of content to facilitators and resource people. While this approach alters the traditional processes of learning and teaching, it does not in any way imply any diminution in the quality of the content of the educational program. It does mean, however, that this content may have to be arranged in different ways so that students can understand and accept its relevance to their goals.

To carry the concept of this new student body even further, some writers (e.g. Burkett, 1977) suggest that the thinking on campuses has to shift from the classification of student to that of client. Burkett maintains that administrators and faculties need to eliminate the existing dichotomy between traditional full-time day students and part-time evening adult students and begin seeing all as equally valued. He states that some of the indirect barriers to participation by part-time students include discrimination in the availability of financial aid; inflexible or limited scheduling of classes; inflexible, time consuming registration procedures; inflexible adherence to prerequisites unrelated to learning objectives or students' previous experience; and academic procedures designed for the recent high school graduate. Burkett sees adult students as the 'growing edge' of colleges and universities and urges them to adjust their delivery systems to serve this clientele.

A particular response model to these same problems is suggested by Comfort (1974). He notes four areas of concern that affect the student, namely, program and curriculum, institutional program, admissions and counseling. Regarding program and curriculum, he maintains that older students seek blocks of learning, not subject matter courses, to satisy a particular need or interest. In addition, they fully expect to learn what they read in a course description or publicity announcement. In the instructional program itself, Comfort, too, stresses the need for instructors to make adults active partners in their own learning experiances and to establish a climate of mutual respect with their students. In the area of

admissions, there should be an evaluation of all a student has experienced in both formal and informal learning, using such devices as the CLEP examinations to measure specific areas. Finally, Comfort sees the counseling service of the college as the interlocking link of the above three. Others, such as Youse (1973) have stressed the various points of contact between the college and the part-time student, ranging all the way from "What happens on the telephone?" to the clarity and relevance of promotional material.

While we have been referring to the older or nontraditional student almost generically, one of the most significant characteristics of this group is that it is not homogeneous. A 1972 survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (in Erickson et al, 1976) notes that the rate of participation in college for persons over age 25 is directly related to the educational level already achieved. While 4% of those who did not graduate from high school participate in further education, 32% of college graduates go back for more. Between these extremes, he found that 12% of high school graduates participate and 20% of those with some college but not a degree. Stated another way, professionals and persons in managerial positions are most likely to engage in continuing education while farmers and the unskilled are least likely. It was found that those with more education prefer the campus for classes, while blue collar workers, those with less than a high school education and older persons shy away from the campus in favor of centers near their homes or places of work.

Another study by Munday (1976) provided similar data of significance to higher education personnel. He found that nontraditional students generally fall into two major groups. One group consists of the older, part-time, commuter, evening, more affluent students. The other group includes those likely to be from low income families, non-English speaking or Black and new to college.

Given these differences, colleges need the flexibility to make differential responses, as needed, if they wish to attract more of the adults who have not had prior college experience.

Modifications in philosophy, image, access and all levels of interrelating with students need to change from the traditional models. Here are some suggested modifications. For one, the line between college and community needs to be erased. The college should present itself as a community resource, like many others, where particular kinds of problems can be solved. It should be as approachable and available to the citizenry as the local public library or post office. Admissions criteria need to be carefully examined so that the person who has not just graduated from high school, with a folder full of grades and SAT scores, has an equal chance with one who has. Evaluation of life's experiences; work-study and cooperative education programs; learning contracts for individual students; ease of entry, exit and re-entry; use of television and other media for instruction; special programs for special publics; competency based rather than certification or degree based education; access to financial aid - all these and more are indications of the institutional response required to respect and accept adults where they are and ease their passage from that point to where they would like to be. The emphasis must shift from the institution as the major focus of policy, planning and decision-making to the student as the major focus, requiring a commitment at all levels of the institutional structure to critically examine policies and practices. As noted by Cross (in Vermilye, op. cit., 88), "College for the masses is not a low-standard version of college for the elite; it is a different kind of institution with high standards true to its own purpose."

Since faculty are the students' major contact with the college, their lives might be the most affected by the shifts required to accommodate various adult publics. For example, those who have traditionally been subject-matter specialists may have to be re-trained to see their subject matter through the eyes of students who have different visions than the assignments in a textbook or the questions on an exam. Subject matter disciplines and departments may change to reflect inter-disciplinary life-related clusters of content. The hours and place of work may change. Faculty may have to meet their students in the evening or on weekends in a variety of off-campus locations. And, perhaps more significantly than any of these, faculty may have to learn to view themselves as one in a broad array of learning resources, with the responsibility of helping their students identify and use the others.

Another aspect of campus life, bureaucratic routines, such as admissions and registration procedures, need to be varied and simplified so that persons are not excluded from the system because of inflexible or overly complex procedures. As an illustration of an attempt to meet varied student needs, let me describe briefly the various ways in which a student can register at the community college where I am employed. For those who wish to pre-register and avoid long lines, appointments are made during the previous semester. At some point, the registrar's office becomes available for walk-in registrations as well as registration by mail. Just before the start of the new semester, we have a one day arena registration, where faculty are present to answer questions. During the first two weeks of semester long classes, students may visit a class to see if it is right for them or if there is still room in the class and register at that time. For some short courses or some courses in off campus locations, instructors will register students in class. The point of this illustration is that it shows the kind of response called for and possible in trying to meet the needs of the diverse student body colleges are now serving.

Another way of looking at this diversity is according to particular institutional responses required by certain subgroups. Harlacher and Hencey (1977) have noted the following as some of the groups requiring specific solutions: the under and unemployed, underchallenged women, the handicapped, those needing job re-training, those needing remedial academic work and study skills and the elderly. For the handicapped group, one specific response required is in terms of physical access. Colleges are now required by law to provide this. For various subgroups, intensive counseling, special classes, individualized learning modules and other responses may be needed to meet the challenge. For some, such as the elderly, provision has to be made to permit them to enjoy learning for its own sake. For this group, particularly, the system of credits and grades is generally irrelevant. They wish to partake of a quality educational product with a minimum of bureaucratic distraction.

It is perhaps among the elderly students that one sees most clearly the significance of the total gestalt of the institution presented to its clientele. This age group is very explicit about its 'terms' for participating in education. The educational package must generally include: convenience of time and easy accessibility of place; a good symbiosis between each instructor and the course he or she teaches; a mutual respect relationship with each instructor; course material of specific interest to them; the opportunity to provide input into the course selection and scheduling process: a minimum of paperwork, including easy registration procedures; no or very low cost; no pressure for exams or credits; a good physical environment which can accommodate those with physical or sensory impairments; and a good interface between college and community, so that the college can serve as the vehicle for access to other community resources.

In California, the evidence is already in that the community colleges are responding most easily to the demands of the new majority. As an open door system, new publics are easily absorbed. Special programs and arrangements to meet the needs of the different publics mentioned earlier can be seen in almost any community college's program. It should be noted, parenthetically, that one of the major benefits enjoyed by community colleges is the absence of tuition, since that is a critical factor in rate of participation by adult students, regardless of socio-economic factors. (Munday, op. cit.). Without the cost hurdle, more adults have looked to this institution to satisfy their learning needs than to any of the four year colleges and universities. The challenge, however, is not to simply absorb new clienteles with new programs but to modify the total institutional response so that these new publics can move freely through the routines and resources of the college and feel themselves an integral part of it.

In sum, the extent and kind of response by colleges and universities to the various challenges discussed here will determine the role they are to play in the 'learning society'. This term is being used more and more in the literature of adult education (e.g., Hesburgh, 1974; Vermilye, 1974) and is generally interpreted to mean a society where lifelong learning is a norm. In such an environment, adults seek to fill learning gaps as they need them, in as time-free and space-free a manner as possible. Models such as study abroad, independent study, work-study, media study and other non-classroom approaches to education proliferate. In addition, all segments of the community can become extensions of the classroom for learning purposes. Adjunct faculty are drawn from various specialties in the community. Because of their practical orientation, these instructors often have more in common with their part-time students than they do with full-time instructors on campus. They are thus in a different relationship with the administration and other segments of the campus than the regular faculty, a relationship that needs to be accommodated if the students are to be well served.

In a learning society, experimentation and experience-related learning amplify and expand traditional subject matter curricula. In such models, faculty provide the framework for learning, but both they and the students recognize that "ultimately it is the student's responsibility to educate himself." (Miller in Hesburgh et al, 1974, 56). Instructors and learners may enter into learning contracts which specify performance-based criteria for purposes of evaluation, criteria which do not translate easily into credit hours and letter grades. In such an environment, faculty may have to work as interdisciplinary teams in order to meet the needs of their students. Innovations and creativity will be required and institutions should recognize and reward these behaviors among faculty and curriculum planners. Some educators (in Vermilye, op. cit., 83-119) foresee a time of learning 'brokers' to match people with learning resources, much as travel agents do. A student would carry an educational 'passport' which would show his/her learning history. There could be an increased separation of degrees from learning credentials, such as now exists in law or real estate, where agencies outside of the educational institutions measure an individual's competency in a particular field.

To some extent, the learning society is already with us and is likely to expand greatly as more and more adults become lifelong learners. The quality and relevance of the educational product are in the hands of higher education decision makers. Colleges can change and grow with the new demands being placed upon them or they can remain true to their original missions and pull back with the decline in the youth population, reflecting a 'smaller is better' syndrome. (Burkett, op. cit.).

Older learners will be served - if not by one institution, then by another. Educational entrepreneurship is widespread, in settings ranging from government

and industry installations to private providers in all content areas. In this array are the colleges and universities, with their accepted place as the leading providers of postsecondary education, and consequently in a position to function as the focal point of these new educational possibilities.

While I would like to end on this note of optimism, I think it would be unrealistic to leave this topic without recognizing some of the difficulties that are likely to be encountered along the way. I would like to underscore, however, that they are challenge areas rather than insurmountable obstacles.

Looking at the internal forces at work on college campuses, Cmit and Ford (in Vermilye, op. cit.) have categorized affirmative action, tenure and unionization as a "lover's triangle" - they can't all survive at the same time. The authors feel that as questions of seniority and tenure collide with questions of conditions of employment for all faculty and questions of more jobs for women and minorities, that the old rules will change. There will probably be intervention of federal and state agencies, with rulings likely to hold for affirmative action over traditional tenure practices. It is apparent that college faculties are going to go through various changes in the coming years. The changes in the make-up of the student body are part of this and represent an opportunity for colleges to re-focus their old emphases from vested interest appointments, by discipline, with tenure, to how to best serve the students.

Budgets and financial resources are another area of potential problems. Two or three part-time students, equivalent financialy to one full time student, place a strain on the resources of an institution. Administrators, faculty and staffs will have to examine institutional priorities carefully and allocate resources in those places most specifically relevent to student needs. Alternate sources of funding may become increasingly significant as the Federal government and private revenue sources support the lifelong learning concept. Some writers (Hesburgh, op. cit.) have urged a voucher system for all citizens to permit them to use their share of public education monies at any point in their lives. Also, all sources of financial aid will have to be re-examined, with criteria expanded to include part-time older students.

Politically, of course, there are governing boards, the legislature and the governor to educate about the lifelong learning phenomenon already well under way. In addition, secondary school districts are going to be increasingly in the marketplace for adult students as enrollments in the fifteen to eighteen year old group continues to decline. (Anderson, 1977). In the case of these institutions, it can only serve the interests of all if colleges work with them to get the message through to political decision makers.

Finally, I would like to close with the comments of Harold B. Enarson, President of Ohio State University, in an article entitled "What is Left to Govern?" (in Vermilye, op. cit., 166). His contention is that, in spite of regulatory agencies, mandates and other myriad imposed pressures, colleges and universities still have control over "just about everything" that goes on in their institutions. The institutional hierarchy has jurisdiction over policies and practices in all areas and thus has the power to make the appropriate responses to the changes and demands of the times. Change in a society calls for change in its institutions. Colleges and universities are not immune to this call.

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